




Directorate of  
Intelligence



# **Afghanistan-Iran Border: The Environment and Insurgency (U)**

**An Intelligence Assessment**



Approved for Release  
Date

September 1982

Copy 338

①

# **Afghanistan-Iran Border: The Environment and Insurgency (U)**

**An Intelligence Assessment**

*Information available as of 20 August 1982  
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

# Afghanistan-Iran Border: The Environment and Insurgency (u)

The 936-kilometer border separates two politically volatile countries, Afghanistan and Iran. The border region, however, has been relatively quiet—a reflection of its sparse population, the few routes across the border, and Iran's curtailment of border incidents that could trigger a Soviet response. Nevertheless, the presence of Afghan refugee camps in Iran, the ease of cross-country movement, and the limited number of border checkpoints create a situation in which illegal crossings are frequent and incidents occur that could exacerbate political tensions. (u)

This paper examines the normal border activity in this little-known region, the physical characteristics and settlement patterns relevant to cross-border movement, recent insurgent activity. (u)

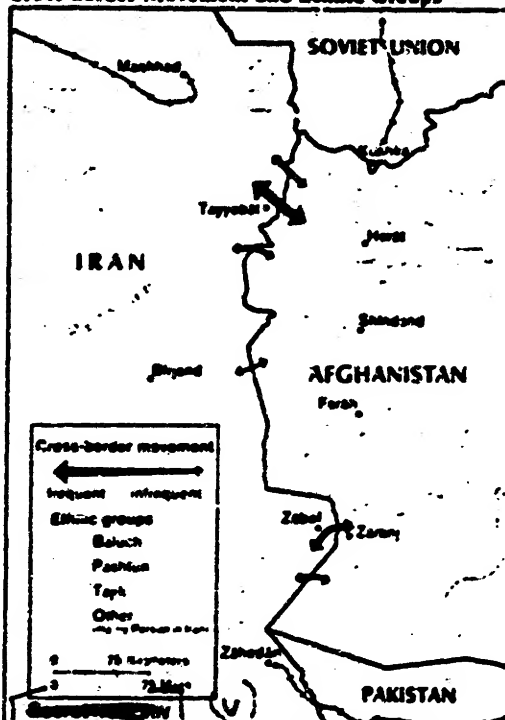
## Traditional Boundary Contacts

People have always moved back and forth across the boundary relatively easily. Local trade in necessities goes on without regard for the boundary, and many of the inhabitants engage in other kinds of smuggling. Limited local trade continues, usually taking place away from the few customs posts to avoid taxes. Since the mid-1950s trafficking in narcotics has been commonplace, and a sizable amount of reporting indicates that the border region still serves as a major conduit for the illegal movement of drugs out of Afghanistan. Almost all Afghans carry or own firearms, but despite the steady Afghan demand for arms, arms smuggling has been light. The official policy in faraway Tehran is to curtail international trade in weapons, but the local incentive to smuggle arms remains strong because the Afghans willingly pay high prices. Iran's border security apparatus is unable to control traditional smuggling or the more recent surreptitious traffic that provides support to the Afghan insurgents. (u)

Most of the legal traffic is in the north along the principal cross-border road connecting Herat and Tayyebat. Border posts are manned on both sides of the boundary. This hard-surfaced road is part of an overland link between South Asia and Europe used by international commercial traffic, now disrupted by the unsettled conditions in Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Good roads parallel most of the border in Iran, usually at some distance, linking small towns and agricultural communities; several fair-weather roads lead directly to the border. There are few roads elsewhere in the border region, particularly in Afghanistan. There, routes to the border are either poor roads or jeepable tracks or trails. An all-weather road leads into the Sistan lowland inside Iran, but in Afghanistan roads into the Sistan are in poor condition. There is no bridge over the lower Helmand. (u)

Cross-border Movement and Ethnic Groups



504488-ADD211 9-82

### The Border and the Insurgency

The sparsely populated border region has been the locale of constant, small-scale fighting and cross-border activity since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Although the struggle between the insurgents and the Soviet-backed Afghan Government has been concentrated in eastern Afghanistan,

The low level of activity along the border can be traced in part to a reluctance by Tehran officials to permit arms smuggling and cross-border movement by the Afghan insurgents. Although ideologically favoring the Islamic Afghan resistance (Mujahedin) and refusing to recognize Kabul's rule, Iran has avoided a confrontation with the Soviets by refusing to openly support the rebels. Iran has, however, been steadfast in lending vocal support to them, calling for the USSR to withdraw from Afghanistan and to allow its people to determine their own future. (u)

### People, Terrain, and Weather

Sparse population in the border region favors covert cross-border activity. The few people who are in the region are concentrated in localities that have sufficient water for irrigated agriculture. Most are found along the lower slopes of mountain ranges that form the border or in the lower courses of two perennial rivers—the Hari Rud in the north and the Helmand in the south—that flow out of the Hindu Kush to the border. Away from the perennial rivers, the desert restricts settlement to areas where water from wells or intermittent streams is available. Nomads eke out a bare subsistence on seasonal grasses. Most of the inhabitants of the northern half of the border region are Persian-speaking Tajiks, who can mingle unobtrusively on either side of the border. The southern half of the border region is Baluch tribal territory; it extends into Pakistan. Pashtuns are found throughout the border region, particularly in the larger towns on the Afghan side. (u)

The terrain also favors insurgent activities and smuggling. The landscape is highly varied—huge salt flats and terminal lakes, rock-strewn or sandy plains, barren hills, and rugged low mountains. Even where there are no roads, vehicles can move in most areas. Although the sparse vegetation limits concealment, movement is difficult to monitor except with frequent and wide-ranging helicopter patrols or numerous small units of ground forces. (S NF) (u)

Although weather conditions would not severely affect small-scale military operations or border crossings at any season, the best time of year for border movement and activity is during the cool winter. Winter temperatures are usually above freezing; mean maximums are between 10°C and 15°C, and mean minimums are around freezing. Temperatures everywhere occasionally plunge to minus 18°C or below. The cold nights are offset by warm days. In winter the air is cleaner, slightly more moist, and less windy than during the rest of the year. (u)

**Sector C**

**Central Desert**



**A fair-weather road in the central desert.**

The largely unoccupied central desert makes up almost half of the entire Afghanistan-Iran border region. Large salt flats, low dissected hill ranges, deeply entrenched dry streambeds, and sand dunes are adjacent to the border. The boundary crosses through usually dry lake basins. The lack of water limits population concentrations to the fringes of the desert away from the boundary in both countries; only a few nomads live in the immediate border area. (SNT) (u)

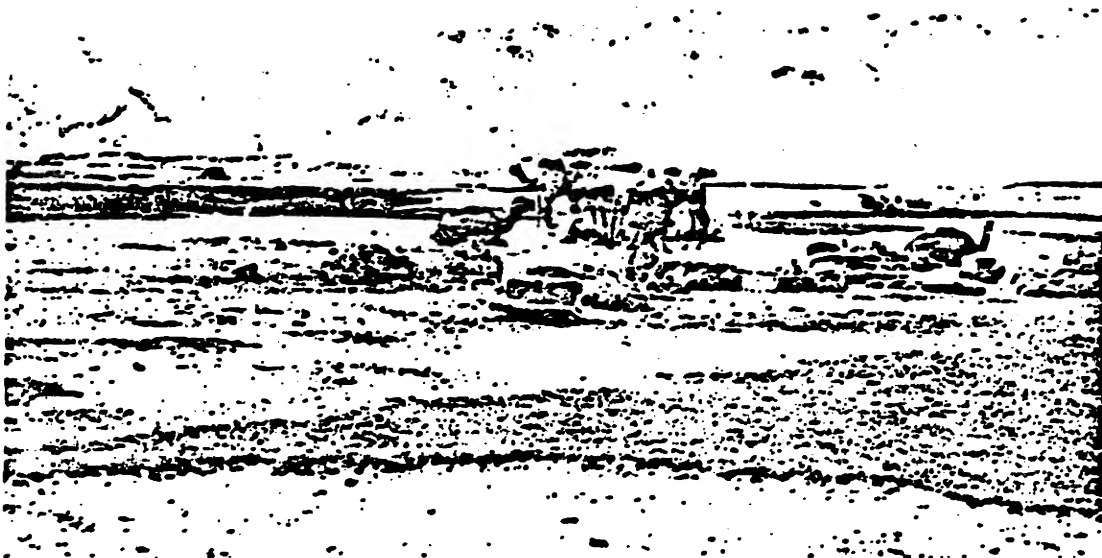
Aside from the nomads, some traffic has traditionally crossed the border using tracks and trails that cross the barren plains. The main obstacle to travel in the desert is the lack of water; wells are far apart and unreliable. Local inhabitants, however, usually can find small amounts of water even in the desert.

[REDACTED]

(u)

## Sector A

### Lower Hari Rud Basins and Hills



Small valley in the northern border sector in Afghanistan.

The boundary in the north follows the Hari Rud (Harirud) as it flows through rugged hill ranges in a narrow channel with steep rocky walls and then through a small basin on the Soviet border. Most of the sector is virtually unpopulated except near the USSR, where people live on both sides of the river. The population is slightly higher and the roads are better on the Iranian side of the boundary than on the Afghan side. The Hari Rud can be forded during low-water periods. ~~USNT~~ U

Crossing the border clandestinely for smuggling and other purposes is relatively easy. The banks of the river are uninhabited for the most part and difficult to observe from either side because of hilly terrain and numerous bends in the river. The best approaches to the boundary are from the Iranian side: a good road paralleling the border cuts across the rugged hills between 7 and 20 kilometers from the river. Travel to the border from inside Afghanistan is impeded by rugged hills and the absence of good roads or tracks. ~~USNT~~ U

4

**Sector B**

**Herat-Tayyebat Corridor**



Low barren hills protrude above desert surfaces southwest of Herat.

Most traffic between Afghanistan and Iran occurs in this sector, along the only hard-surfaced, all-weather highway that crosses the border. The road links Herat, the main city in western Afghanistan, with the principal trading centers of eastern Iran. Nearly all commodity traffic between the two countries uses this highway. Customs posts are manned on each side of the boundary. (U)

The terrain is mostly flat and easily trafficable, even for vehicles, except in the north where vehicular movement is restricted somewhat by the Hari Rud and by low hills. The river is perennial and can be forded in a few places, particularly during the low-water season. (U)



Sector D

Sistan Lowland



Flat desert surface and sand dunes inside Afghanistan

The Sistan lowland receives the water of the Helmand River and lesser streams in a series of brackish lakes. In the north the boundary traverses the internal drainage lakes and marshes of the lower Helmand system. The flatland adjacent to the river supports fairly dense agricultural settlements. To the south the boundary crosses barren desert. (C) (u)

Crossing the boundary in the Sistan lowland is easy except across the lakes and marshland. The marshes, however, are trafficable during dry periods, when movement is relatively unrestricted. The Helmand River is fordable in only a few places. (C) (u)

Traffic across the border in the Sistan is traditional between the agricultural communities of both countries. The boundary is open and easy to cross.

[REDACTED] just to the south of the farming regions, tracks and trails crisscross the border, and movement is relatively unrestricted by terrain.

[REDACTED] (u)